

# buildOn Alum Gets Second (and Third) Chance to Make a Global Impact

🏠 / BLOG

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*At buildOn, we celebrate the creative and adventurous steps that members of the buildOn movement take to support education and service at home and abroad. Our “Members of the Movement” series highlights the vital work these supporters are doing to help empower youth and end the education crisis.*

As a high school student at the Bronx School for Law, Government and Justice (BLGJ), Sorangel Liriano impacted the lives of hundreds of New York City residents by serving her community with buildOn. When she graduated from BLGJ in 2014, she had plenty of service to be proud of — cooking meals at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, helping children with disabilities, tutoring and mentoring elementary school students — but Sorangel had one major regret. She never got to build a school.

When Sorangel started attending Columbia University the following fall, she figured she was done serving with buildOn and she would never have a chance to build a school in a developing country. Searching for other ways to stay involved with service, she attended the university's activities fair and was surprised and overjoyed to discover that Columbia had a buildOn Global Community Team.

Like all of buildOn's Global Community Teams, the Columbia team's mission is to build schools in developing countries as part of buildOn's Trek program and advocate on behalf of the world's 900 million illiterate people. By joining, Sorangel made up for missing out on Trek in high school by going on not one, but two Treks over the course of her first two years at Columbia, with a third scheduled for later this year.

**Sorangel's decision to join a buildOn Global Community Team took her to Haiti as a freshman, Nepal as a sophomore, and now, as a junior, Sorangel will be traveling to Malawi in May 2017.**

"I wasn't aware that buildOn actually had Community Teams," Sorangel says. "So when I saw the Columbia University buildOn information table at our activities fair, I literally went right to it." Her decision to join took her to Haiti as a freshman, Nepal as a sophomore, and now as a junior, Sorangel will be traveling to Malawi in May 2017.



*Above: Sorangel (right center, wearing a pink shirt and white hat) poses for a photo on the worksite in Haiti with her Community Team and with community members.*

But Sorangel has been more than just an active member of her Community Team. By the time her sophomore year at Columbia rolled around, the Political Science and Human Rights double-major had already become co-president of her Community Team. “Our Community Team could not continue unless someone took on the leadership of being president, and so right then I jumped on the opportunity because I wanted buildOn to continue its legacy at Columbia,” Sorangel explains.

**“I’ve participated in other programs where I’ve had host families, and although I couldn’t understand much of the language, [going to Nepal with buildOn] was one of the closest experiences and relationships I’ve built anywhere that I’ve been around the world.”**

Going on a Trek as a Community Team is no easy feat, as members raise all the money needed to build a school themselves. As co-president of the Columbia Community Team, Sorangel is an avid

and innovative fundraiser, doing everything from selling brownies door-to-door in the dorms to reaching out to mentors at companies like Apple and the MacQuarie Group to match the team’s fundraising efforts.



Above: Sorangel (left) stands in front of the buildOn table at the Columbia University’s activities fair. On top of being the co-president of the Columbia University buildOn Community Team, Sorangel is a Trek Intern with buildOn in New York City, where she helps prepare groups of students from buildOn’s U.S. Service Learning Programs to go on Trek.

“One of the things we do is partner with local schools,” Sorangel says. “We reach out to them, and




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Sorangel refers to the two trips that she has been on — first to Malawi in Nepal in March 2016 — as two of the greatest experiences of her college career. Nepal was especially meaningful because of the bond that she created with her host mother, Kalpana.

“My host mom really, really liked pictures, so throughout our time there I took Polaroid pictures of her and the family and everything that was going on,” Sorangel says. “Then at the end of our trip, I surprised her with an album of all of the Polaroid pictures. She was really happy. When I was

presenting it, I never cry in front of people, but I couldn't stop crying."

Their bond must have also meant a lot to Kalpana, because at the end of the Trek, Kalpana had Sorangel wear one of her own traditional dresses to the closing ceremony. "I've participated in other programs where I've had host families, and although I couldn't understand much of the language, that was one of the closest experiences and relationships I've built anywhere that I've been around the world," says Sorangel.



*Above: Sorangel (center) stands with her host mother Kalpana (right) and a neighbor (left) in a Polaroid photograph taken in Nepal.*

Even though the relationships created between Trek members and the community are incredibly meaningful, the sustainability and impact of Trek is what keeps driving Sorangel to build another school. By empowering community members to be a part of the entire school construction process, and by using local materials to construct the school, buildOn's Trek program is different than any other global development program that Sorangel has been a part of in the past. "It is important because the countries we work in have really low literacy rates and high poverty rates," Sorangel says. "The sustainability [of the buildOn Trek program] is the reason I keep going back, and the fact that members of the community participate in making the project possible."

To support the Columbia University buildOn Community Team, please [click here](#). If you are

interested in starting your own Community Team, take a look at our [Global Community Teams webpage](#).

*Below: Sorangel stands with community members during her first Trek to Haiti. "When I'm on Trek, I don't want to stop working," Sorangel says. "Even if it is carrying rocks or digging a hole or something like that, it's adding to the effort to construct the school for the community. That's my main focus. Be involved with as much as I can with everything that's going on."*



📅 Posted February 1, 2017    📁 in [News, Stories](#)    👤 by Brett Slezak

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